CASTLEMAINE NATURALIST

JUNE 1981 58

EXCURSION TO MUCKLEFORD FOREST 9/5/81 EP

First stop was to examine a suspected hybrid eucalypt near the Castlemaine golf course, growing in a line of red gum. The general appearance of the tree was that of a red gum and had the bark typical of a red gum. However, the buds showed only a trace of the usual red gum beak.

It may be a hybrid or merely a form of red gum. To decide, seeds would need to be planted. If a variety of red gum, all of the seedlings would be similar with narrow, pointed, alternate, green, stalked leaves. If a hybrid,, a variety of seedlings would arise showing characteristics of both parents. The identity of the other parent should also then be obvious. Perhaps some member of the club would be willing to try this out.

In the burned forest the burned eucalypts are suckering profusely but there seems to be very few seedlings of any plant. If those that have germinated have died because of dryness or browsing, the forest may take a very long time to recover from the fire.

Highlight of the trip was the discovery of a sugar glider in a hollow. It obligingly showed itself when the tree trunk was tapped, so that there was ample opportunity for club members to have a close look.

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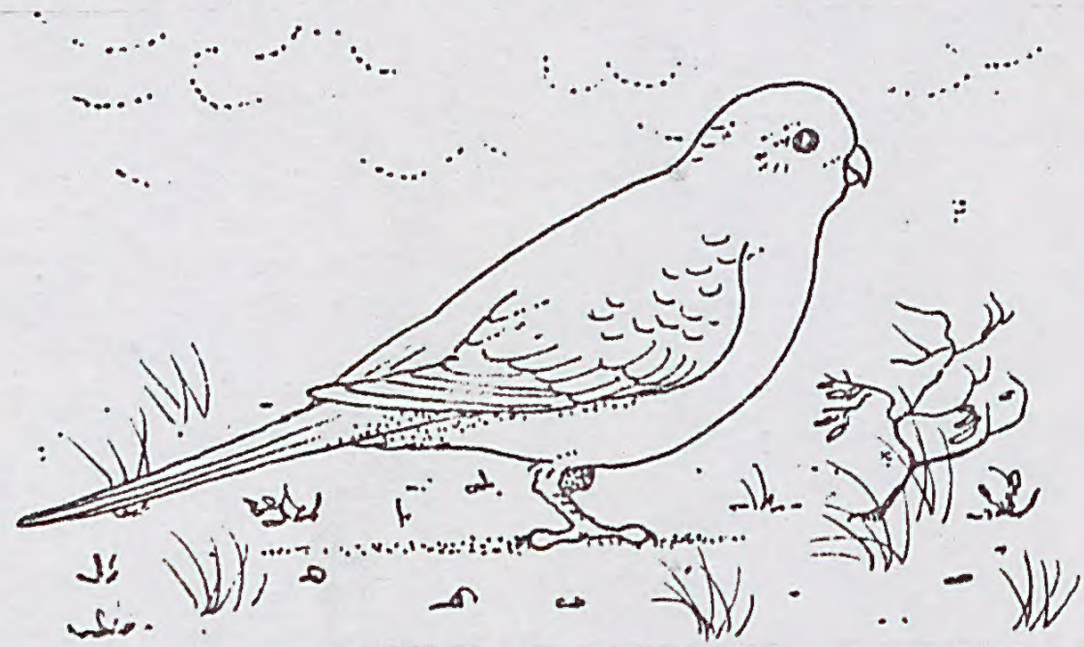
Extinction is Forever

The Orange-bellied parrot & point Wilson Tragedy.

The Werribee sewage farm is not, to many people, an attractive or interesting place to visit, but to the field naturalist or lover of peaceful uncluttered places, it is a magnificent area of rippling ponds and windswept grassy plains abounding with native flora and rare fauna. Facing the still waters of the Bay is one of the best bird watching areas in Victoria - the Spit and adjacent foreshore, which is regarded as being the most important feeding ground for migrating waders in Victoria. The waders include the Broad-billed sand piper, Large sand Dotterel, the very rare Asiatic Dowitcher, and the White-rumped Sandpiper only seen twice in Australia. Also seen at Pt. Wilson is the endangered Orange-bellied Parrot.

The Orange-bellied Parrot is usually only found in coastal Tasmania and the Bass Strait Islands, but from March to November, is seen along the central Victorian to Eastern S. Australian coasts. It is a small parrot, (20 cm long), emerald green above, yellow below with blue edged wings and a small bright orange patch on the abdomen. The parrots frequent open coastal areas and light scrub, feeding on seeds, fruits and berries, and occasionally decaying kelp. It was only last year that nesting areas in Western Tasmania were found and study begun of their breeding habits.



When the parrots are wintering in Victoria almost the entire world population (60 - 200) can be seen in one day at Werribee or Swan Island. It is a chilling feeling to realise that that small flock of parrots, strutting between these salt bush clumps could represent half of this species. With a lot of luck, intensive research in Tasmania and Victoria and carefully supervised management of its threatened wintering grounds, the orange-bellied parrot

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" PELORUS JACK "

by Ray Bradfield

As far a I can recall, the "Castlemaine Naturalist" has not yet featured an item relative to the denizens of the deep, so here goes ! This item is abridged from Captain F. Rhodes' splendid 2 - volume maritime history, entitled "Pageant of the Pacific".

As far back as 1870, there were reports of a large fish which attended vessels bound to Nelson, New Zealand, but it was not until 1880 that Pelorus Jack gained recognition, becoming an established institution. His regular beat was from Chetwode Island to Clay Point, and because this was off the mouth of Pelorus Sound - so named after an exploring brig-of-war, which operated there in 1838 - he was called "Pelorus Jack".

He was of the species generally known as Risso's Dolphin, (Grampus griseous). For over thirty years this strange fish escorted steamers to and from French Pass, and he became such an institution, that he was protected by an Order-in-Council of September 26th, 1904. This was duly published on page 2302 in the N.Z. Government Gazette, on the 29th of that month.

In 1905, Jack had an accidental encounter with the N.Z. cross - straits steamer ,"Penguin". Struck by the bow of the steamer, he was badly wounded, and badly scarred. However this established the fact that he was the only fish of his kind engaged in his strange, self-imposed escort duties.

The "Penguin" was lost with all hands (67 in all) in February 1909, and Pelorus Jack survived this ship, which he had piloted more than any other, by only three years. Captain Rhodes quotes from Government sources, the Ministry of Marine, for the following obituary information

"It is thought that he may have been shot by a party of whalers, who were operating in his vicinity at that time, (1912). Never at any time was there more than one specimen of his species observed, which fact, together with his protection, prevented the fish (sic) from being examined any more closely than from a ship's deck."

(Note : Despite the official use of the title "fish" , Pelorus Jack was not a fish, but a Dolphin and therefore a mammal. Recent research has attributed to dolphins a high order of intelligence, together with the ability to communicate among themselves very effectively).

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EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF A FIELD NATURALIST

THE LANGUAGE OF BIRDS.

by W.E. Lyford

It would appear that at long last scientists are beginning to realise that the inhabitants of the feathered world are capable of intelligent communica-tion in so far as vocal expression is concerned - thus robbing homo sapiens of the supposed superiority he has enjoyed for a great many centuries.

Recent discoveries have effectively disproved the old belief that bird talk is purely instinctive. These findings have been made possible through the use of electronic tape recordings whereby the song, cries, and chatter of North American birds have been played to Europeans of the same species. Moreover the fact of the existence of variations in dialect and accent not readily discernible to the human ear is positively established.

In other words the birds of a particular species living in different parts of a country (as for instance England or France) reveal variations in accent, while those of a similar species which inhabit other countries possess articulation foreign to the others. Experiments with crows have revealed that the French do not understand the American. All of which serves to indicate that the ancient legend of the Tower of Babel must be extended to embrace the whole of Nature.

Yet these discoveries may not be so surprising to those who have studied the tribal life and customs of that relic of the Stone Age - the Australian Aborigine. And if we turn to that highly developed nation, the British, one finds in the north of England many words in common use that are completely unknown in the southern counties. Perhaps ignorance of the intelligence of birds may be forgiven when one remembers that not so very long ago the scientists and philosphers of Europe thought that the Earth was flat and the centre of the Universe.

British ornithologist Geoffrey Boswell writes that "the separate development of bird song in different continents resembles the separate development of human forms of communication. Birds have been subject to chance influences which affect development differently in different areas".

David Gunston of the magazine "WILD LIFE" writes "We are learning fast about the way non-human ears receive sound. And that opens up whole new realms of research relevant toall Nature".

American scientist Dr. Hubert Fring reports the result of experiments with tape recordings of American crows which he played to the French. Unfortunately, he does not name the species of crow - which is a common failing with many people when speaking of this bird.

The result of the experiments proved that the French crows failed altogether to understand what the American crows had been talking about. The recording played to them was an alarm - a warning of danger - which should have immediately caused the birds to disperse. But the French crows gathered round, presumably from curiosity or perhaps thinking that there was something to eat.

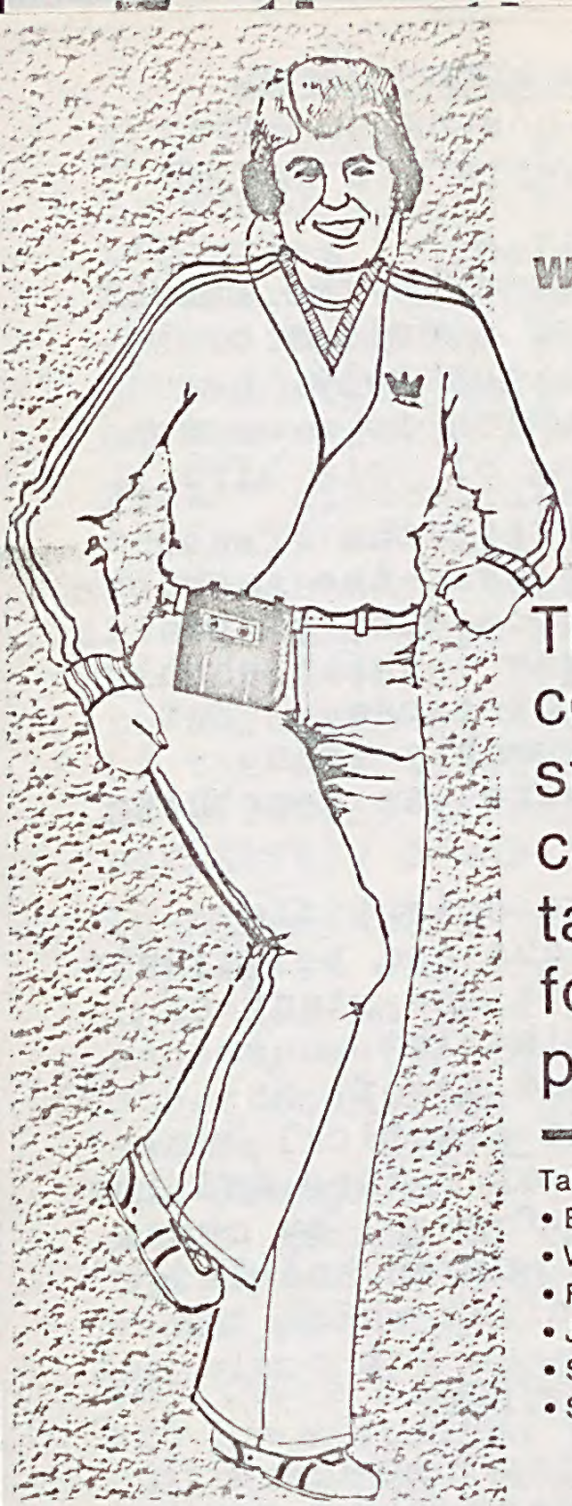
These findings are not only of immense scientific importance. They also bring into focus and illuminate the two main points of view relative to the study of Natural History, viz:- that of the scientist whose profession demands factual evidence and proof, as compared with that of the layman whose practical knowledge is acquired from a visual study of Nature and its Habitat in a rural environment. The former, by means of modern technology has now obtained proven knowledge of certain characteristics common to birds which the unprofessional observer hasknown for ages but could not prove to the satisfaction of the scientist.

The study of bird language is also being conducted in Australia where we have some very talkative and musical species including the magpie, the lyre bird, the parrot and the swallow. The use of electronic devices has already disclosed variations in the song of the lyre bird not previously discerned by the human ear. And it will be interesting to compare the effects of record-ings of South Australian and Victorian magpies - sedentary birds whose linguistic abilities may be matched only by the chatter of the migratory swallow.

Courtesy of the "Benalla Naturalist"

Excursion to Muckleford: continued from page 1.

Because of the bare ground orchids were easy to spot, even although they were not numerous. Near the Boronia patch a clump of Greenhoods was found, which were later identified as the Swan Greenhood. Parson's Bands were found in several areas.



"Go Walkabout" by Unitrex

The compact stereo cassette tape player for active people

Take it along —
- Biking
- Walking the dog
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- Jogging
- Skating
- Skiing, etc.

Big News for Club Members

Club officials are pleased to announce this splendid deal for members. For only $99-95 you can be the owner of one of these minute, go-anywhere cassette players. You will be able to take it with you on all club outings.

No longer need you have that feeling of being isolated in the bush away from civilization, with only the sound of the occasional bird, or wind in the leaves for company.

By carefully turning up the volume in your headset, you will be able to drown out the conversational efforts of other club members as they rave over some obscure rare flower or boring specimen which they have just discovered.

You will be able to smile and nod intelligently while at the same time having your mind blown by the latest up and coming pop group at full volume.

Think how much more attractive this will be than listening to your leader expounding at some length about the beauties of nature.

If you are insecure and are terrified by the absence of familiar sounds; if the quietness of the bush, relieved only by the call of a bird, the buzz of an insect, or the whispering of the leaves is too much, then you can prerecord the familiar sounds of ho e and take them with you. Out there in the bush away from civilization, you will be able to listen to the semi-trailer changing gears at your front gate, the motor cyclist racing past, or the lawn mower next door, early on a Sunday morning.

What about those days when we venture into the bush to observe birds, only to find that all the feathered citizens have decided to move elsewhere for the day ? Instead of wandering about, not daring to talk, straining our ears to catch the faintest twitter, we can

now have all the bird noises we want on a cassette (for details, see Secretary), so we can just park our cars, get out the Esky, open a few tinnies, and catch up on the latest gossip. And when we want the birds to sing, we just have to lift a finger - to press the button.

Extinction is Forever: continued from page 2

may just survive. Then we would be spared yet another addition to the shocking list of extinctions since white man began clearing, bufning and polluting Australia.

However, although the L.C.C., the Port Phillip Authority, EPA, and Town & Country Planning Board all agree on the immense value of the Spit, it is in great danger. I.C.I. has been granted permission to build a 500 million dollar petrochemical plant on the hinterland of Point Wilson. Not only does this particular siting threaten the parrots and all other wildlife, but the hydrocarbon and nitrogen emissions could add to photochemical air pollution of Melbourne and Geelong. The factory will also be close to flight paths for Avalon Airfield. Imagine the possible holocaust if a collision occured .

We may have been too late for the orange-bellied parrot anyway, but certainly now the I.C.I. plant will ensure its disappearance. Will the Geelohg-Melbourne green block become the site for further industrial development and a graveyard for other rare visitors and inhabitants ?

Co-operation between conservation groups, andactive support by their members in helping our environment to survive and in informing the public may avert a similar ecological disaster before it gets off the ground. Extinction is for ever, and it is up to us to stop it.

(From the Melbourne University Conservation Society N'letter)

MYSTERY BIRD STORY (continued from April Newsletter)

Confronted by this small bird with slender curved beak, buff bars on the wings and rusty throat patches I was stumped. Nothing like it could be found in any of several bird books. However some nights later while flipping through the Reader's Digest book a phrase caught my eye, "If this were a female it would have two red throat patches". After I managed to find the place again, there I found a photograph of a male White-throated Treecreeper.

On checking back through the various books, I found that the only one which even hinted at rufous throat patches was Robin Hill, but that was most indefinite.

Club Calendar

Friday: June 12

Meeting, Mr David Buntine will speak on
"Tourist, student, and forester in the USA".
Note that this was previously advertised for July.

Saturday June 13.

Outing: A walk through the Pine Forest to the North of C'maine.
Leader, Mrs Rita Mills.

Friday, July 10.

Meeting: "Spiders"
Guest speaker; Mr H. Barclay, President, Creswick F.N.C.

Saturday July 11.

Outing: Emberton. This is an area which has been designated a flora reserve by the LCC, so the club has decided to become more familiar with it. It is in the Taradale area.
Leader, Mr E. Perkins. Leave Ed. Centre at 1.30 pm.

Friday August 14

Meeting : Film night. A program of interesting 16 mm movie films is being arranged.

Saturday, August 15.

Outing: The Wellsford Forest. This will be a full day trip as it is a little further than usual, i.e. about 35 miles or 55 km. Depart Ed. Centre 10.00 am. It has been suggested that a BBQ lunch would be a nice idea.

Friday, Sept. 11.

Meeting: Beekeeping;
Speaker, Mr R. Goodman

Sunday Sept. 13.

Outing. The Muckleford Forest, with members of the Maryborough FNC. Meet Ed. Centre at 1.30 or the Gowar School at 2.

Monday Sept. 21

Hike: The annual Show-day holiday long walk.
This year a hike from the High School, through pine forest and native forest to Expedition Pass. Lunch at the Pass, then return to the High School by a different route.

VICTORIAN FIELD NATURALISTS CLUBS ASSOCIATION

There is a camp-out proposed for the weekend of September 19 and 20 at Alexandra.

Outings will be held to :-

Cathedral State Park
McKenzie Flora Reserve.

A slide evening, hosted by members of the Upper Goulburn FNC.

Accommodation:

There are two motels, two hotels and a caravan park in Alexandra
For further details, see secretary.